

## *The Daily Advance*

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It took the slayings of two university students — one in Durham, the other in Chapel Hill — to draw attention to North Carolina's fractured network for keeping track of repeat crime offenders.

In the aftermath of Abhijit Mahato's and Eve Carson's deaths in 2008, state officials have developed a statewide computer system to give law enforcement, court clerks, prosecutors and judges a single tool to keep track of offenders.

State Controller David McCoy earlier this week presented the system, called CJLEADS — for Criminal Justice Law Enforcement Automated Data Services — to a group of court officials and law officers from the Albemarle region. The system, which the General Assembly is funding, is expected to cost \$27 million and be fully in place within a year.

The meeting was held at College of The Albemarle, with part of the presentation being private so one of McCoy's experts, Kay Meyer, could show details without jeopardizing security.

Outside the meeting room, McCoy's business operations manager, Sondra Phillips, demonstrated how the system works.

The system contains an offender's court record, along with incarceration information, post-sentencing information, whether the offender is a gang member and whether the offender has distinguishing marks, scars or tattoos.

The system also shows whether the offender has been convicted of a sex crime.

"So, it's not only law enforcement. It's the criminal justice environment in its entirety," Phillips said.

McCoy told the gathering of officials Tuesday that the biggest problem in the past has been that there are seven different tracking systems, each with different computer passwords, computer time-out issues and ways of identifying offenders.

What happens in a criminal case, McCoy said, is that a law enforcement agency has to use different systems to obtain information about an accused person. That can create cracks and gaps in the record, he said.

"When you're dealing with the public safety, you can't have gaps," he said. "We have to be about the business of closing those (gaps) down and minimizing risks."

State officials learned tragically three years ago just how important it is to keep track of defendants who frequent the criminal justice system.

In January 2008, Mahato, a student at Duke University, was killed by then-unknown assailants. Two months later, Carson, student body president at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was killed in her neighborhood.

A suspect in Carson's slaying, Demario Atwater, was soon identified. However, questions began surfacing about the criminal justice system's handling of the Durham man after he was also named a suspect in Mahato's slaying.

At the time of both slayings, Atwater was supposed to be on intensive probation for a 2005 conviction in Wake County for a breaking and entering. The probation officer in charge of his case, however, did not know of Atwater's whereabouts for nearly half a year.

Atwater had pleaded guilty in Granville County in 2007 to possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, but word of his probation violation was not promptly relayed to authorities in Wake. As a result, he was out of jail when Mahato was murdered.

The mistakes didn't end there. When Atwater was arrested in Wake County in February 2008, he was released on bond. When he appeared in a Wake courtroom the next month, his records were sent to another courtroom, forcing the judge to continue the case. Two days later, Carson was dead.

McCoy's voice filled with emotion as he spoke about Carson's death.

"She was gunned down, in my neighborhood, 200 yards from my front door. She was a friend of my daughter's. She attended the same high school that my wife attended," he said.

In April 2010, Atwater, in a plea agreement, received life imprisonment on federal charges in the death of Carson.

In the aftermath of Carson and Mahato's slayings, the General Assembly realized something had to be done, McCoy said. He praised the Legislature for finding funding for the CJLEADS system despite \$3 billion in state budget cuts